

Voices of the Rainforest: Politics of Music

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This article is a critique of professional innocence, specifically of the documentation practices of ethnomusicologists that implicates them in the complex politics of musical commodification. To make the discussion as experientially grounded as possible, I will situate it around the representational politics of *Voices of the Rainforest*, my recording of music and environmental sounds from Bosavi, Papua New Guinea.¹ My concern in what follows is to situate how the local and global intersect in new forms of cultural production and to indicate how such projects can simultaneously encode messages that might be read as representing both ends of a moral and political spectrum. This problematic illustrates ways that participation in the traffic of commercial world music circulation provokes potential situations of what Renato Rosaldo has termed 'imperialist nostalgia',² situations where highly positioned parties lament, indeed may feel anger about, the passing of what they themselves have helped to transform.

Conventions of writing culture, of inscribing otherness, have been increasingly analyzed by anthropologists and historians. Yet little of that critical awareness of the allegorical and narra-

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tively positioned nature of representation has made its way towards ethnomusicology, and certainly not in terms of other genres besides the written word. But given the centrality of making and circulating recordings to the field of ethnomusicology, it is necessary to critique the history of representational tendencies toward the construction of presumably transparent, authoritative, realist samples of something called 'traditional music'. Claims to innocence, uncontaminated political neutrality, or purist political advocacy that may accompany recordings are a significant field for postcolonial critique. Critiques of the inscribing of otherness are becoming just as important as the more politically obvious and current discourse on cultural ownership and repatriation.

Surely it is a mark of the contemporary moment that knowing something of the collision of forces responsible for *Voices of the Rainforest* presents us with little sense of improbability. But substantial disjunctions are embedded in this particular cultural production. For example, there is the contrast of recording in Papua New Guinea, 'the last unknown', where people of the highland interior have come into contact with outsiders only in the past fifty years, and making a commercial ultra-high-tech CD with portable state-of-the-art equipment and experimental field and studio recording techniques. There is the contrast of recording the sounds of birds and music among a small group of isolated people, the Kaluli, whose rainforest environment and cultural future are now threatened by recent oil exploration that will yield multi-billion dollar profits for American, British, Australian and Japanese companies, as well as for the government of Papua New Guinea. (It is the government that owns the rights to everything under the surface of the land and hence is actively, whether or not unwittingly, creating fourth world ghettos within its expanding providence of extracting riches at the cost of civil unrest and violent protests.)

Then there is the contrast of an academic anthropologist, linguist and ethnomusicologist (me) who has studied Kaluli language, music and culture over the course of sixteen years, working with a rock-and-roll drummer, Mickey Hart, of the Grateful Dead.³ And there is the contrast in the final product: my previous

1. Commercially released in the United States by the Rykodisc label (April 1991) and in Australia by Festival (April 1992).
2. Renato Rosaldo, 'Imperialist Nostalgia', *Representations*, no. 26, 1989, pp. 107-122.
3. Mickey Hart is active in the preservation of musical diversity through educational funding, concert promotion (the Gyuto Monks tours of America), books (*Drumming at the Edge of Magic*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1990; and *Planet Drum*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1991) and recordings.

two LP recordings⁴ were published in relatively obscure academic series, while Mickey produces a successful and well-known series, *The World*, licensed to Rykodisc, a major independent label whose catalogue ranges from popular world musics to some of the more esoteric (Frank Zappa) and more glittery (David Bowie) rock artists known today.

There are parallel contrasts in the realm of promotion too. The events that launched *Voices of the Rainforest* are extraordinary when compared to those typically surrounding the release of an academic product. The Earth Day weekend opening gala for the recording began in the northern California mountains at the very plush and very private high-technology screening room of George (Star Wars) Lucas's Skywalker Ranch. Randy Hayes, Executive Director of Rainforest Action Network, and Mickey Hart spoke on the intertwined topics of rainforest survival and musical survival, and I presented a megawatt surround-sound CD preview and synchronous computerized slide show for members of the audio, radio and record industry. The next evening the three of us presented the show again at San Francisco's Greens Restaurant and hosted a \$100-a-plate fund-raiser to benefit both the Bosavi People's Fund (the trust Mickey and I established to receive royalties from *Voices of the Rainforest*) and the Rainforest Action Network's campaign against logging and rainforest destruction in the Kutubu-Bosavi area of Papua New Guinea. Then during the next two months I travelled across the United States with the slide-show preview to venues ranging from classrooms to zoos to nightclubs to malls. The scale of these activities provides a major, indeed outrageous contrast to both the material wealth of the 1200 Kaluli people in Bosavi and to the typical funding or promotion for most academic research and publication.

Living with all of those tensions, and finally deciding, in 1989, after Mickey had begun his *The World* series on Rykodisc, to do a major project with Mickey has meant confronting how *Voices of the Rainforest* was to be marketed. Treating it as world music encodes multiple significances, from the more benign and noble to more suspicious and vulgar. First the label: what 'world music' signifies for many is, quite simply, musical diversity — the idea that musics originate from all world regions, cultures and historical formations. Here the term 'world music' circulates in a liberal and relativist field of discourse. In a more specific way, world

4. *Music of the Kaluli*, Boroko, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1981, *Kaluli Weeping and Song*, Kassel, Barenreiter, 1985.

music is an academic designation, the curricular antidote to a tacit synonymy of 'music' with Western European art music. Here the term explicitly exists as marked and oppositional in a more polemical field of discourse. But it is as a commercial marketing label that 'world music' is now most commonly placed. In this context the term refers to any commercially available music of Non-Western origin and circulation, as well as to all musics of dominated ethnic minorities within the Western world. Here the term draws attention discursively, as does the term 'world beat', to the dialectics of isolation and hegemony, resistance and accommodation. The commercial development of styles like reggae, blues, zydeco, conjunto, salsa, forro, as well as the increasingly political framing of musics from places like Ireland or Bulgaria are often invoked by this sense of 'world music'. In a related fashion, 'world music' also means music for/of/in a market; music of the world to be sold *around* the world. In this arena, 'world music' draws out senses of commodified otherness, blurred boundaries between exotic and familiar, the local and global in transnational popular culture, the assertion of 'authenticity' and the confusion over 'synthesis', 'syncretic hybrids', 'creoles' and 'fusion'.

Voices of the Rainforest, like all recordings, has a specific location in terms of these dimensions of world music and the world beat. As the very first compact disc completely devoted to indigenous music from Papua New Guinea, *Voices of the Rainforest* signifies an effort to validate a specific culture and musical region otherwise generically submerged in American record stores in a bin labelled 'Pacific'. While the recording would not have been possible without my research background and long-term connection to Kaluli communities, *Voices of the Rainforest* is not principally a research document.⁵ Rather, it is an unabashedly commercial product meant to attract as large a listening audience as possible, through the appeal of both superb audio reproduction and vibrant musical and natural sounds. The press, radio play and initial sale of 20,000 copies during the recording's first year on the market indicate some success at this agenda.

The hour long *Voices of the Rainforest* presents twenty-four hours of a day in the life of Bosavi. We begin before dawn with a section titled 'From Morning Night to Real Morning'. It features

5. For its research background see my 'Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or "Lift-Up-Over Sounding": Getting into the Kaluli Groove', *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, no. 20, 1988, pp. 74-113; and *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

the overlapping voices of birds waking up a Kaluli village. A segment of morning sago-making follows; women sing as they scrape and beat sago starch and their voices are overlapped by those of children, some responding to the song with whistled imitations of the birds whose calls are heard in the distance. Another morning work-activity follows: groups of men sing, whoop and yodel in echoed polyphony as they clear trees for a banana garden. After the trees are down, women clear the brush with machetes, singing as they go. This morning work-section is followed by two midday tracks illustrating leisure music-making. First is a series of bamboo jew's-harp duets with bird calls and cicada rhythms; then a woman sings at, with and about a waterfall. A return to ambient sounds follows this section. 'From Afternoon to Afternoon Darkening' chronicles the transition from afternoon bird volleys to the dense electronic-sounding interplay of insects and frogs of dusk. An evening rainstorm follows, with interspersed voices of frogs, insects and bats. Next is a ceremonial sequence, first with a group of drummers, and then a ritual song performance that moves an audience member to tears. The recording closes with an ambient segment, 'From Night to Inside Night', where voices of frogs, owls, kingfishers and night insects pulse through misting winds into the hours toward dawn. In total, Bosavi is presented as a co-ordinated world of continuously overlapping sound clocks, with ambient rhythms and cycles intermeshed with human musical invention, performance and spontaneous interactions.

Without academic explication, the entire recording allows the listener to enter and subjectively experience meanings of the Kaluli notion of *dulugu ganalan*, 'lift-up-over sounding'. Kaluli invoke this idea to explain the overlapping, interlocking, alternating nature of all sounds, ambient and human, and the textural density and in-synchrony but out-of-phase organization in their vocal and instrumental genres. The recording illuminates how 'lift-up-over sounding' is the Bosavi rainforest groove, the transformative pulse that simultaneously makes nature sound so musical and their music feel so natural.

This sort of editing structure indicates that the aesthetics of *Voices of the Rainforest* departs from the typically commercial 'world music' CD to take a major musical risk: while conventionally numbered as cue-bands, the recordings are fused and continuous, and they are equally of the natural environmental sounds and local musical expression found in Bosavi. All of these sounds, ambient and musical, are edited together to produce one fluid sixty-minute soundscape, a meta-composition that evokes, through my technological mediation, ways that Kaluli experience and ex-

press the music of nature as the nature of music. In work, leisure and ceremonial contexts, Kaluli musical invention is illustrated to be of a piece with the sounds of birds and waterways or the pulses of frogs and crickets. The vocal and instrumental tracks on the disc are inspired both sonically and textually by natural sounds, and the editing practices I have employed make it possible for a listener to experience how Kaluli appropriate these into their texts, melodies and rhythms, to merge with the musical ecology of their place.

To bring this rainforest groove to its fullest evocation, Mickey and I, in our roles as techno-intermediaries, developed the best field recording package we could imagine. Given both the unreliability of digital recording and current portable technology in the humidity of the rainforest, and the tendency for digital to thin out critical high frequencies that we wanted to be as warm and saturated as possible in recordings of birds, insects and water sounds, we both felt fully committed to analogue recording. Microphones are to ears what camera lenses are to eyes, reduction technologies that imitate human sensory apparatus by performing specific ranges of limited functions from which perceivers recreate fuller perceptual cues. But without multiple microphones and portable mixing capabilities, it is impossible to simultaneously record, with full spatial dimensionality, the height and depth of the ambient rainforest environment, either alone or in the context of its musical backdrop to other sounds. So instead of imagining that any one real-time, two-track recording could produce a full audio image, I decided to break down and record the forest's various height and depth zones separately and then to add them back together in the studio. This meant often mixing two or three sets of stereo tracks to recreate the full audio atmosphere of any particular time of day or musical occasion. Obviously such practices violate the spatial and temporal integrity of any given recorded moment or event, but in return it offers the possibility of optimizing the full surround of sound once these layers are added together and the environment thereby reconstituted.

These field and studio practices were not simply a case of technical audio experimentation or *trompe l'oreille*. They were occasioned by a desire to transcend the technical limitations of microphones and live two-track recording, but they were also stimulated by the nature of the Kaluli sound world as well. I had always wondered if the local idea of 'lift-up-over sounding' in fact indicated how the temporality of sound was imagined by Kaluli as spatialized height arching outward. Having component audio tracks in the field meant that I could experiment informally and attempt to further understand the Kaluli 'lift-up-over sounding'

ously strikes back toward equity and empowerment in a substantial way, while at the same time reproducing the entrepreneurial and curatorial position of the already empowered.

As liner notes I wrote an imaginary letter to Mickey from the rainforest. This was the easiest way to speak in a vernacular voice and to maintain the emphasis on being there and taking the listener there. In addition to descriptions of contents and contexts of the recordings, the notes acknowledge the irony of the disc: just as the music receives international recognition as a volume in *The World* series Kaluli songs, along with most other cultural practices, are quickly transforming or vanishing. The environment of the Great Papuan Plateau is now threatened by oil pipelines, roads and logging. Drawing attention to the relationship between cultural and ecological destruction in rainforests, the notes use the term 'endangered music', intending the listener to imagine how the ravages of artistic loss are suffered by indigenous people just as species thinout is suffered by their local flora and fauna in the degradation of their waters and lands.

The ways these multiple dimensions of world music are figured in relation to *Voices of the Rainforest* as a commercial production are obviously connected to current debates in anthropology and other fields, debates about the politics of cultural representation, about dimensions of control, authority, ownership, 'authenticity' and power relations. Many anthropologists were once content to celebrate and embrace local intellectuals and their societies, particularly the small-scale ones, for their integrity. Pleased to be inspired by myriad forms of inventiveness, by experiential design patterns that challenged conventional senses of self and other, anthropologists celebrated diversity in idealized terms. Now that it is widely assumed that there is an awful lot less cultural diversity or integrity of any inspirational sort left on the planet, many anthropologists have become critics of state-indigene relations. They have become resistance cheerleaders, or cultural survival advocates, inspired in their own vision or alienation or need to struggle by the intensity of chaos and harm so mightily and recklessly visited upon the others that they care to chronicle. The politics of being an engaged and responsible researcher are now deeply bound up with giving voice to people whose validity, indeed, humanity is denied or silenced by the dominant. Because the practices of anthropology are so firmly located within this discursive side-taking, the field's intellectual products — talk, books, articles, recordings, films — are now increasingly subjected to intensified scrutiny. It is a scrutiny which comes from inside and outside both the community that actually undertakes and the

community that is the subject of research.⁷

How then might one further scrutinize the representational politics of *Voices of the Rainforest* simultaneously as commercially avante-garde cultural production, and as 'world music'? One way is to acknowledge that *Voices of the Rainforest* presents a unique soundscape day in Bosavi, one without the motor sounds of tractors cutting the lawn at the mission airstrip, without the whirring rhythms of the mission-station generator, washing machine or sawmill. It is without the aeroplanes taking off and landing, without the mission-station or village church-bells, Bible readings, prayers and hymns. It is without the voices of teachers and students at an airstrip English-only school, or the few local radios straining to tune in Radio Southern Highlands, or cassette players with run-down batteries grinding through well-worn tapes of string bands from Central Province or Rabaul. It is without the voices of young men singing *Tok Pisin* songs while strumming an occasional guitar or ukulele at the local airstrip store. And it is without the recently intensified and almost daily overhead buzz of helicopters and light planes on runs to and from oil-drilling areas ranging over thirty miles to the north-east.

Does this mean that *Voices of the Rainforest* is a falsely idealized portrait of Bosavi's current acoustic ecology, romantic at best, deceptive at worst? Certain critical viewpoints could position it that way, and an honest response could only accept why those concerns are voiced, and acknowledge the currency of their politics. After all, *Voices of the Rainforest* transparently embodies the highest of postmodern ironies: it presents for us a world uncontaminated by technology, one that is hearable only because it has been brought to us courtesy of the most high-tech audio field and studio techniques currently available. But it is also important to insist that the recording is a highly specific portrayal, one of an increasingly submerged and subverted world of the Bosavi soundscape. Clearly, it is a soundscape world that some Kaluli care little about, a world that other Kaluli momentarily choose to forget, a world that some Kaluli are increasingly nostalgic and uneasy about, a world that other Kaluli are still living and creating and listening to. It is a sound world that increasingly fewer Kaluli will actively know about and value. However, it is one that increasingly more Kaluli will hear on cassette and sentimentally wonder about.

Lest it seem that there is still some hedging here, the stakes can

7. See Edward Said, 'Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors', *Critical Inquiry*, no. 15, 1989, pp. 205-225.

be stated more bluntly and personally. The sound world in Bosavi is one that I hear as powerful and unsettling and, more importantly, one that can still be heard. Because my role in *Voices* is equal part researcher (background) and sound artist (foreground), I feel a need to make that world more hearable. I feel the need to amplify it unashamedly in the hope that its audition might inspire and move others as it has inspired and moved me. *Voices of the Rainforest* then is no illusory denial that both nature and culture in Bosavi are increasingly drowned out by 'development', the apologist euphemism for extraction and erasure. Rather it is an affirmative counter-drowning of 'development' noise with an aggressive assertion of a co-evolved sonic ecology and aesthetics. As a celebration that is also an alarm, My representational re-erasing is motivated equally by affection and by outrage, indicating both the memory of florescence and the sense of escalating loss that characterizes Kaluli life today. *Voices of the Rainforest* speaks to remembrance at a moment of forgetting. It talks back from my feelings of revulsion over the way a church mission and government rhetoric of 'development' and a 'better future' has only meant worse health, less autonomy, more vulnerability, less culture and diminished integrity for Bosavi people right now.

The notions of 'endangered music' and 'endangered culture' equally demand scrutiny. The danger of promulgating such terms is obvious: by equating music and culture with animal and plant species the impression may be conveyed that the project means to promote protectionist purism, cultural zoos, reservations and conservation parks. Duty of preservation agendas often carry very conservative political slants to them. Invocation of the 'endangered' label also tends to dredge up fears of control, of desires to freeze time and place. There is no doubt that the discursive placement of the 'endangered' notion is itself quite dangerous. Most importantly, it is potentially or actually deeply insulting to indigenous peoples in the context of their own struggles to control the terminology and imagery of how their interests and identities are represented.

On the other side, aligning the notion of 'endangered music' or culture to that of 'endangered species' encourages a potentially important intellectual and political alliance. Every instance of the thinout of planetary bio-diversity is currently connected to the real or potential thinout of cultural, linguistic and artistic diversity. Environmentalists and ecologists are increasingly aware of the important interactions between humans and plants and animals that not only shape processes of adaptation but define the very nature of regions and communities. Linking the struggles for rainforest environments with the future of the people indigenous

to them is an essential aspect of promoting the integrity of people and place, of local rights and survival. Besides, anthropologists have virtually let the environmental movement freely create the illusion that the only thing at stake in eco-destruction is cute and cuddly animals and the plants that Western pharmacy needs to cure cancer. It is critical for us to insist, to the contrary, that the struggle for these places is the struggle for the survival of people whose knowledge of the animals and plants is critical both to balanced management and future deployment for global medical betterment.

Obviously, intersecting with issues such as these, the editorial politics and aesthetics of *Voices* are dense and complicated. So too are the consumption concerns that extend from them. So far nobody has thoroughly confused the recording with the New-Age meditation tapes whose titles, while similar, indulge and seduce with promised echoes of the audio-idyllic. But, as we all know in popular culture, subordinate social formations are always the sources of fantasy and relaxation for the dominant classes or societies. *Voices of the Rainforest* hence undeniably contributes to both enhanced Western primitivist fantasy and voyeurism, allowing a listener to enjoy an hour of yuppie green politics, or audio-leisure tourism, perhaps even while feeling righteous about wealth trickle-down. 'Release' from the modern world and into the 'awesome-ness' of nature is central to the nostalgia promulgated by the New-Age movement, refashioning prior romanticisms and re-creating them as quasi-spiritual experiences that connect 'us' to 'them'. Does this neutralize my intentions or the potentials of the recording to work against the grain of destabilization?

The point, of course, is that once a recording is in the marketplace, one has little control over how it is consumed. Notes and other contextual material, as well as interviews and other media interventions, may be acts that indicate our serious desire to take responsibility for representation. However, they cannot control what happens once the decision to commodify has been made. Quite significantly, that goes for 'merely academic' recordings too, even ones framed by obscure jargonized notes, musical transcriptions or specific invocations. For example: when recordings of Aboriginal Australian or Sepik (PNG) music carry the explicit label 'do not play this recording in the presence of any females or uninitiated male members of the . . . society', do they in any way claim to be able to control just who does and does not hear the music? Does discharge of ethical duty by a cover sticker guarantee compliance any more than notes on meaning and intention guarantee forms of 'proper' reception and consumption?

An additional problem here is that much anthropological and

political debate on the control of and responsibility for representation is circumscribed in almost entirely realist and literalist terms. The most typical criticism addressed to *Voices of the Rainforest* is framed this way, as an insistence that destruction and domination be treated in more overt, 'serious' terms. That critique strikes me as equal parts sincerity and naiveté. There is only one response, and a rather old one at that: artistic projects are, for some of us, equally overt and 'serious' however much more risk their subtleties bring to the realm of cultural politics.

Mickey and I obviously decided to throw ourselves behind a particular hope. It is a hope that devotion to state-of-the-art audio techniques and to a combined artistic and political vision would ensure that the recording was not only the best audio document it could be, but that it dramatized the current environmental and cultural survival issues in Bosavi, that it evoked both the florescence and loss of rainforest musical ecology. In a world where 15,000-20,000 species of plants and animals a year are destroyed by the logging, ranching and mining that escalates rainforest destruction,⁸ *Voices of the Rainforest* was meant as an assertion that we must be equally mindful of the precarious ecology of songs, myths, words and ideas. Massive wisdom, variations on human being in the form of knowledge in and of place, these are co-casualties in the eco-catastrophe. Eco-thinout may proceed at a rate much slower than cultural rubout, but accomplishment of the latter is a particularly effective way to accelerate the former. The politics of rainforest ecological and aesthetic co-evolution and co-devolution are one, and Mickey's initial reaction to hearing the Bosavi rainforest could not have turned out to be more eerie in the larger political economy of musical and cultural destruction. This is too important to be kept in the zone of academic secrets.

The representational issues embodied in the content, artwork, packaging, recording, editing, marketing and royalty distribution of *Voices of the Rainforest*, many of which have been barely touched on here, are closely situated within the larger problematic of the process I call 'schizophonia to schismogenesis': namely, how sounds are split from their sources, and how that splitting is dynamically connected to escalating cycles of distorted mutuality between local and global practices.⁹ From schizophonia to schis-

8. Catherine Caulfield, *In the Rainforest*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984; Mark Collins (ed.), *The Last Rainforests*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.

9. See S. Feld, 'From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourses of "World Music" and "World Beat"' in Charles Keil and Steven Feld,

mogenesis, concretely located in the making and circulating world music for consumption, provides an example in the more generalized social experience central to our historical, discursive and cultural moment. Just as 'tradition' was once constructed the nostalgia of modernity, so its more vague cousin 'memory' ongoingly inserted as the nostalgia of postmodernity. In that context it is necessary to acknowledge that one's passion for what one has been privileged to experience in knowing other cannot mask full or partial complicity with institutions and practices of domination central to commodifying otherness. Hence face the necessity of engagement with the problematics of what Rosaldo has called 'imperialist nostalgia', and the parallel necessity to explore why projects embarked upon with self-conscious progressive political and aesthetic agendas are neither innocent nor discursively free from postcolonial critiques.

Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.